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ABSTRACT

China Incarnate Word (CIW) is a joint venture of University of the Incarnate Word (San Antonio, Texas), and South China Normal University (Guangzhou, China). Courses are taught in English by U.S. professors, and a University of the Incarnate Word degree is earned. Two of the main goals of China Incarnate Word are: (1) to create an environment in which the finest aspects of Chinese and United States cultures are respected and communicated; and (2) to provide multicultural opportunities to enable students to learn about various cultures in the contemporary world. This paper describes how eloquently the sadness and empathy was unspoken on the streets of Guangzhou (formerly Canton) the day the New York twin towers fell, defining cross-cultural communication. The paper notes that the author serves as Vice President for Academic Affairs at China Incarnate Word Education Center and that was settling U.S. instructors (n=17) into the campus, who had arrived just one week before the U.S. terrorist attacks. It relates the personal experiences of the author and colleagues as they interacted with the Chinese in the community about the September 2001 U.S. terrorist attacks. (BT)

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AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CHINA: TEACHING THROUGH THE CRISIS

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An American University in China: Teaching through the Crisis

I thought I had become halfway good at cross-cultural communication. I was learning to operate at the edge of my comfort zone and was finding that zone growing. In short, I rather smugly thought I knew what to expect next. But no experiences, textbook, or seminar in diversity ever defined "cross-cultural communication" as eloquently as did the unspoken sadness and empathy that greeted me on the streets of Guangzhou, China PRC the day the towers fell.

As Dean of the School of Education at University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, I also serve as Vice-President for Academic Affairs at China Incarnate Word Education Center. China Incarnate Word (CIW) is a joint venture of University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio and South China Normal University in Guangzhou, China PRC. Courses are taught in English by American professors, and University of the Incarnate Word's degree is earned. Two of the main goals of China Incarnate Word are 1) to create an environment in which the finest aspects of Chinese and United States cultures are respected and

communicated and 2) to provide multi-cultural opportunities to enable students to learn about various cultures in the contemporary world.

Many of the 17 Americans in my care had arrived in China one week before the attack. Five had come to teach English at the elementary and secondary school on the campus. The other 12 are professors at China Incarnate Word.

We received the news almost immediately. The Registrar and I were putting in late hours hand-scheduling classes for the 150 Chinese students enrolled at China Incarnate Word. New students were being placed in English as a Second Language at whatever levels their TOEFL scores suggested. The second year students were sorted into the courses they had been waiting for all through their Intensive English Language Program the year before. At last they could begin university level courses in American history, United States government, psychology, music appreciation, and macroeconomics - all taught in English by United States professors.

The phone in the office rang about 10:30 PM and the music professor said a plane had just hit one of the World Trade towers. Thinking it was a tragic accident, and having no idea of the scope

of damage, we expressed sadness for the accident and went back to our work. The phone rang again. A second plane had hit. By now we all began gathering around TVs to watch the horror unfolding live on Chinese television.

Some of us called relatives in California to check on family known to be flying, and found ourselves breaking the news all the way from China. Regular Chinese programming had been interrupted to bring live coverage of the event that changed the world.

I do not know when we finally quit watching. Numb and suddenly more fiercely American than we had been at breakfast, we separated and went to our respective apartments. Wednesday morning Chinese time (Tuesday night, United States time), we watched Peter Jennings and Dan Rather try to find words to describe the horror, and we watched replay after replay of the actual impact, then the subsequent collapse. I wanted to see Godzilla appear and prove the whole thing was a bad movie.

Later that day I experienced the ultimate in people-to-people communication. Students who spoke English put their arms around us and asked if our families were safe. They told us they were shocked and even frightened by what was happening in the

United States. Those who did not speak English hugged us even tighter, making up for the inability to verbalize their sympathy. Students shyly passed notes to their professor. Some were written with labored English and many errors. Some had clearly been polished with the help of English software. Messages were as simple as, "Sorry of 9-11 terrorist happen. God bless the world", or as polished as, "I'm sorry to hear the bad news about 'Terrorism hits America'. I'm sure God will bless America! I'm on your side." All reflected a sensitivity that should not have been surprising, but was. Frequent references to God were especially surprising since our host country had carefully schooled us about its position of not recognizing organized religion.

Located in South China, on the Pearl River, Guangzhou is the 3rd largest city in China. Previously known as Canton, it is considered the economic capital of China. China Incarnate Word is located approximately 45 minutes outside the city in a rural setting near Zhenlong Town. On Wednesday several of us drove into Guangzhou for office supplies and the special treat of a Big Mac at one of the two McDonalds in the city. (In this unlikely setting, McDonalds competes with Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken. The Thousand Island dressing served on the pizza gives

McDonalds the edge.) As we walked down the always-crowded sidewalks, men and women held up newspapers with pictures of the towers or the Pentagon and shook their heads sadly to communicate their sorrow to us. Others reached out with a single wordless touch. Those touches spoke volumes by people across the world from the horror to which they were responding.

Later that night I gathered all the Americans to my apartment for some therapeutic venting. Additional notes from students were shared. One touching message was made even more touching by knowing the struggle it had taken to compose it in English. It read, "I thank American teachers. Being away from homeland must be hard thing to live. I hope for peace in America the world. China people feel terribly about what happened. Happiness." Another read, "I was very saddened to learn about the happening in New York yesterday. I am Chinese and hope peace in the world. My heart heavy for American teachers and want you know Chinese people don't take terrorism. Happiness to all of you."

In spite of the outpouring of sympathy, one newly arrived teacher expressed indignation that some elementary and middle school students had said they were glad it happened. When pressed

for details, it turned out that one student in each of two classes had done so. In both cases other students had reacted with heavy disapproval of their classmate's behavior. To keep things in perspective that night, it was pointed out that the United States was appalled by the report, apocryphal or true, that students in a Dallas school had cheered when Kennedy's assassination was announced over the school speaker system. Examples of youthful insensitivity do not have national, nor ethnic boundaries.

Sometime during that awful week, one of the elementary teachers left for her assignment in Gaoming, a neighboring city. When she arrived, students had made a huge drawing of the towers being struck by planes. Beneath the drawings were handwritten notes of sadness and sympathy.

Throughout the next two weeks classes went on as scheduled with the event bringing real life to United States government classes. "What is a Speaker of the House?" "Why was he protected as much as the Vice -President?" Even the concept of local government and federal government was demonstrated by the high profile of Mayor Rudolph Guiliani and by President Bush's address, carried live to homes, cafes, and rural gatherings in Mainland China.

The non-credit course, Reading and Writing for Academic Success, provided a forum for writing opinions of how the United States should respond to the attack. Responses gave practical advice such as, "The airport staff should check the guests carefully, look [at] them [to see] if they are terrorists." "The TV station shouldn't broadcast more violence films." Some gave wise instruction: "The U.S. government [should] create the good relationship with each country, treat every race [of] people equal." Some urged the United States to be strong. "I hope American Government will be unyielding, strong to face this sad event, and take reasonable action. I hope American people will return to common life as soon as possible." Some gave foreign policy advice. "Experiencing this event, I think American Government ought to revise its attitude and policy towards the Palestinian question, even the question of the world."

One of the Chinese employees at CIW told me she hoped I would not feel bad, but some of her friends thought the United States deserved the attack. They told her the United States tries to police the whole world and that is wrong. She was very proud of her rebuttal. She asked them, "If someone was in your neighborhood, killing families and stealing their possessions,

wouldn't you want a policeman to come help and to make sure the thugs did not come to your house?" They said, "Of course, but that is different." "No", she countered, "it is the same. People in the world are killing others and stealing their rights. Be glad the Americans are willing to protect other people, not just their own." She was eloquent in her passion for the United States.

I returned to the United States at the end of the month – the professors and schoolteachers well settled into their classes. I would be lying if I said I did not look around that plane carefully. But I also felt what might be called "American defiance" about flying. When I finally landed at LAX, I retrieved my luggage and went through immigration and customs. At the last station in the process, I was asked how long I had been away. "Too long," I replied. With a rare smile you do not expect from a customs officer, he said with feeling, "Welcome home!"

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